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Slavitt’s translations of the complete Odes of Horace are highly readable, unfussy versions whose liberties with the original will be familiar to readers of Slavitt’s previous translations. Gone, seemingly (and in this adverb lies much of Slavitt’s achievement), are the agony and defeat of translating a Horatian ode, supplanted by congenial versions whose spirit carries over to the brief entre nous notes that accompany each ode. The Latin text of the odes is not included in the book.

Slavitt is adept at breaking the hold with which Latin frequently grips English translation by inhibiting idiom, determining the shape of clauses, and restricting diction to dictionary or thesaurus equivalents. He has no qualms about tossing an entire stanza or two into the translation hopper for a remix. “I don’t suppose myself to be translating words or even lines but the poem,” he says in the notes to Ode 3.3. His translation of this same ode shows Slavitt carrying this approach a step further: he omits the final “deflationary” stanza of the Latin, which for him mars the poem, as he tells us in his note to the ode. In contrast to these and other liberties, nearly every translation, while dispensing with meter, looks like the traditional Latin texts of the original odes, with their variously indented stanzas, couplets, and the occasional stichic verse.

Since a Horatian ode confronts a translator with a decision-making challenges similar to the Lifeboat Dilemma in ethics—how many people can you allow on board before you run the risk of capsizing, and whom, if you must, will you reject?—readers able to compare Slavitt’s versions to the Latin original will frequently miss some dear friends. In Slavitt’s translations, the loss can include some compelling images in the original.
Take, for example, the exceptional third stanza of 3.9, an ode chiding Maecenas for his reluctance to leave Rome to join Horace in the countryside:

Fastidiosam desere copiam et
molem propinquam nubibus arduis
omitte mirari beatae
fumum et opes strepitumque Romae.

Slavitt renders:

Take
a little break from the acquisition of even
more wealth than you already have
in Rome’s hectic and noisy arena.

This is clear and conveys enough to move the poem along, but gone is the complex attitude Horace captures in the fascination (mirari) with boom-town (beatae) Rome despite (but also perhaps because of?) its flaws. Missing too is the topographical and architectural detail of Maecenas’s famous tower (molem) piled up against the clouds, a tower that gives the vantage point for the both the experience of the noisy, smoky metropolis below and the countryside Maecenas gazes on in the distance, as mentioned in the previous stanza. This seems like missed opportunity.

Elsewhere, it is not just an isolated image that has been jettisoned for benefits that are not always readily apparent, but a rendering of the Latin’s internal patterns, unifying imagery, and formal qualities that in many of the odes are as much of what the poem is about as any drama or pronouncement. Two famous examples will illustrate. Much of the fun of the Pyrrha ode (1.5), for instance, comes from Horace’s use of water-imagery, beginning with the naïve unsuspecting lover-boy drenched in perfume and proceeding through the stormy seas of betrayal before concluding with Horace’s drenched votive offerings to the god of the sea. In Slavitt’s version only the soaked votive garments are retained, with the loss of a major unifying feature of the poem.

Challenges of a different order are presented by 4.7 (“Diffugere nives…”), especially in the third stanza’s tour de force of compression. In seventeen Latin words each of the four seasons makes a momentary but vivid appearance, displacing the previous stage even as its own existence is, within the same line, undermined by the next phase. Slavitt devotes over forty words to the stanza (not counting articles
and prepositions). While this expansion adds, by way of compensation, some atmospheric imagery like springtime fragrance and harvest barns, it sacrifices Horace’s expressive brevity that interlocks the seasons in a Shiva-like wheel of creation and destruction. The whole poem, however, shows Horace exploiting possibilities in Latin, such as future participles and the inchoative infix, that are closed to English, so in this case, unlike in 1.5, there are no easy fixes.

Overall, Slavitt’s diction and phrasing are on the casual and idiomatic side of the spectrum, with relatively sparing use of slang, “Macedonian bimbo” being an exception. There are no glaring cultural anachronisms like Ezra Pound’s “frigidaire patent” in his homage to Propertius. He can be disarmingly whimsical about some of his choices and freedoms. In 2.16, for instance, he alters one stanza from third person to second person because it makes the poem “a little grabbier,” and he concludes the poem with a change in sense because “I admire Horace and want to put him in the best light possible.” In 3.1, he admits to finishing off a stanza by padding it with “I have seen this happen/over and over again.” While the effect of Slavitt’s poetic register can be flat and devoid of the electricity one feels, say, in Ted Hughes’ *Tales from Ovid*, one of Slavitt’s achievements is precisely the sense his translations give that Horace and English are commensurable. Many of his translations are a pleasure to read for their alliteration, rhythm, skillful line-endings, and a unified tone. It is a tribute to both his talent and past experience as a translator that Slavitt makes this creation of readable odes look much easier than it is.

Slavitt’s notes are an interesting, even curious feature of the book. Whereas the translations are clearly aimed at the Latinless reader, the notes strike me as more useful as shop-talk about strategies for Latin readers interested in literary translation. The notes, generally only a paragraph or two long, usually steer clear of interpretation and focus quite often on what he has done with the proper nouns and adjectives that add the complex layer of cultural, mythological and historical references to the odes. He discusses the range of choices—to omit (1.33, 2.6), to gloss (1.34, 2.1) or to substitute a better known ancient or (less commonly) modern parallel. Other translators of course simply footnote the obscure elements retained in their translation, but Slavitt privileges the translation as a comprehensible entity in itself and so eschews this method.

The most obvious audience for these translations is the Latinless reader interested in an introduction to the entire corpus of the Odes. It will be less useful for those using Horace as a cultural or historical source, in light of the liberties that erase some of the relevant detail. I could also see some profit from its use by students reading Horace in Latin, especially if a component of the class was the art of
translation. Here Slavitt’s translations would provide an approachable companion whose liberties would provoke comment and whose notes would articulate some of the issues translators of Horace face.

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